



# Something new from FIA

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## Today's big story



Lt. Gov. John Cherry addresses audience members at an Earned Income Tax Credit event in Benton Harbor Jan. 21.

## Earned Income Tax Credit outreach initiative

**Slogan is "You earned it, you keep it"**

In January, Michigan began its initiative to put up to \$49 million in the pockets of Michigan workers through increased filings for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC.

**The EITC is of special interest to FIA customers** because married couples with children having earnings in the \$10,000-\$15,000 range qualify for the greatest benefit. Low income single or married adults without children with modest earnings can qualify for a benefit of up to \$382.

Michigan's effort focuses on free tax preparation sites in communities. New Volunteer Income Tax Assistance – or VITA – sites opened in January. VITA sites help taxpayers prepare taxes free of charge and will help qualifying families recoup EITC for which they are eligible.

All five FIA pilot counties held organizational events in January with their local partners and some held special events. The FIA circulated posters and flyers on the initiative to all county and district offices in February to help case specialists advise their customers of the financial benefits. For more information on the statewide initiative go to [www.michigan.gov/eitc](http://www.michigan.gov/eitc)

**For free tax help...**

To view a list of Volunteer Income Tax Assistance sites in 21 counties, go to [www.michigan.gov/eitc](http://www.michigan.gov/eitc) and click on "County Resources and Site Schedules"

**Make Tax Time Pay!**

Claim All the Tax Credits You Earned

The Earned Income Credit and the Child Tax Credit Tax Benefits for People Who Work

**EIC up to \$2,547**  
If you have one child in 2003 and your family earned less than \$23,667, you can get up to \$2,547.  
• File Form 1043 or 1040R  
• Attach Schedule EIC

**EIC up to \$4,204**  
If you have two or more children in 2003 and your family earned less than \$33,682, you can get up to \$4,204.  
• File Form 1043 or 1040R  
• Attach Schedule EIC

**EIC up to \$382**  
If you are married and living with you in 2003 and you earned less than \$11,230\*. And if you were between ages 19 and 64, you can get up to \$382.  
\*If you are married, you must file jointly.

**Tax Time Can Pay Even More!**

The Child Tax Credit can be up to \$1,000 for each child.

If you earned more than \$10,000 in 2003, file Form 8812.

**EITC**  
Earned Income Tax Credit

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## Director says... what do we call this? what's your question?

By Marianne Udow



Welcome to "Something new from FIA". This newsletter is the beginning of a change in the way we will get information to you about the FIA, our programs and your co-workers. One of the goals for this publication is employee participation. I want to hear about your stories and coworkers and I know other

employees want to know, too. Each week as I have met more and more of you, I have been impressed with how much you are doing and how many unsung heroes and heroines we have. I'd love for us to pass along those stories. This newsletter is designed to do that. We want to share news with you and hear from you. And, as you have said in the Vision and Values sessions, we know that putting things on our web site is not necessarily the best way to get information to you. So we are delivering this newsletter to your e-mail box.

We've also sent this via e-mail to encourage you to use this and respond to it. Do you have a question about a program or policy direction in the FIA? Do you have a question about why we do something that just doesn't

make sense to you? Do you have some news to share about our programs or services? We will set aside space in each issue for an interactive column using the **Q&A** icon. We will do our



best to find answers to your questions and publish them. You can submit them through the editor of this newsletter by email to [Vandesandel@michigan.gov](mailto:Vandesandel@michigan.gov)

Now what about a name? As you know, we are thinking about names these days. So here is your first chance to name something! It's obvious this newsletter name can't stay "Something new from FIA" for long; so we are asking you to submit ideas for its name. We'd like to know what you think is a name that can last over time and will represent us as a department. You can send your ideas to Larry VanDeSande at his email address above.

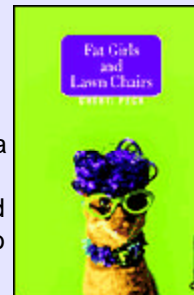
This newsletter won't replace the emails I send when I have information or observations I want to share with you. Rather, this is an additional communication – really, your forum – a time and place for you to share with each other. So please take advantage of this opportunity and communicate with us. We want to hear from you. Watch for more communications changes in the coming weeks!

## Proof there is life outside the FIA Kalamazoo County employee publishes humorous memoir

From Barbara Mitchell, Eligibility Specialist  
Kalamazoo County FIA, Kalamazoo

[MitchellB2@michigan.gov](mailto:MitchellB2@michigan.gov)

My office cube mate, Cheryl Peck, wrote two books that have been purchased by Time Warner. The first was recently released; it's called "Fat Girls and Lawn Chairs" (right) and is a riot to read. I loaned my copy of the book to my mother and she's enjoyed it a great deal too. It's a good thing to read when you just need to laugh at the world for a bit.



Cheryl is an eligibility specialist in Kalamazoo County and also worked in the Jackson County FIA office prior to transferring here several years ago. She is a career employee with more than 20 years of service. While the book is not work-related, it does show that it is possible

to have another career – not to mention life – outside the FIA.



Author Cheryl Peck and companion Babycakes

The book was published January 1, 2004. Currently Cheryl is doing several appearances and book signings around the country. She has also donated autographed copies of the book during fundraising events.

Critics and readers both like it. Here's an excerpt from a review by Publisher's Weekly: "Peck's collection of humorous essays and poems is nothing if not irreverent. These warmhearted reminiscences cover everything from Peck's childhood to her experiences as a gay woman of size. In (one story) Peck explains how she came to conclude that 'no self-respecting fat girl ever really trusts a lawn chair.' In 'Wounded in Action', the most hilarious and dramatic entry, she describes her misadventures on the softball field. Warner is positioning Peck as 'a gay Erma Bombeck'."

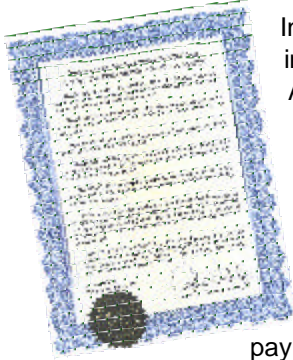
The cover of the book was a source of much debate and angst! Several proposed covers were provided by the publisher and most just didn't cut it. The cat ended up being the best of the lot and does slightly resemble the Cheryl's cat Babycakes.

■ Read the entire online review at: <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?cds2Pid=794&isbn=0446692298>



## Kent County FIA exemplary service cited

Wyoming Mayor Douglas Hoekstra Jr. signed a proclamation Dec. 1 thanking the Kent County Family Independence Agency for emergency assistance in a housing situation. The proclamation identified Kent County FIA staff members **Kathleen Greiner, Ted Britton, Larissa Cochran, Jeff Hudson, Francisca Gonzales** and **My-Lien Nguyen** by name for meritorious service.



In August 2003, the Wyoming building inspector issued an order to vacate the Amsterdam Gardens Apartments "because of severe housing code violations", the proclamation said. The building had 137 occupied apartments, "many by people of low income including 68 clients of the Family Independence Agency." The city issued a one-time \$500 per resident payment to help with relocation costs.

"The FIA agreed to process the relocation payments for both the FIA and the city, a task involving considerable staff time over a 60-day period," said the proclamation.

"The Wyoming City Council does hereby express its appreciation to the Family Independence Agency for its substantial emergency efforts on behalf of the city...and the tenants...with no families becoming homeless," it said.



### Governor at FIA meeting

Governor Jennifer M. Granholm dropped in at the FIA Statewide Director's meeting in Lansing Jan. 13. The governor told administrators the FIA was her favorite agency (we promise not to tell anyone!) and thanked us for doing a good job for Michigan citizens. Seated back are FIA Legal Affairs director Musette Michael (left) and FIA director Marianne Udow.

Do you have a local story to tell? Did something inventive, interesting or exciting happen in your county? Send it and photos for publication to [Vandesandel@michigan.gov](mailto:Vandesandel@michigan.gov) or call Larry VanDeSande at 517-373-7394. Please have your story approved by local authorities first.



Pictured left to right are members of the Agape Circle who helped assemble duffel bags for Crawford County FIA: Front row: Barb Kinsey and Mary Watson. Back row: Rosemary Bendick, Terry Tody, Linda Kernstock and Susan Thiel.

## Local church members pitch in for Crawford County foster kids

Information: Martha Burns  
[BurnsM5@michigan.gov](mailto:BurnsM5@michigan.gov)

The Christmas season brought out the spirit of giving from the Agape Circle, a Bible study group from Mt. Hope Lutheran Church of Grayling.

When group member Linda Kernstock learned Crawford County Family Independence Agency needed duffel bags for the foster care program, she responded by letting all church members know of the need. Through the Agape Circle the church went to work purchasing and outfitting 25 duffel bags for children in Crawford County.

Crawford County FIA uses the duffel bags in the foster care program. When children from Crawford County are placed in foster care, they often need a suitcase or bag for their personal items. They often need basic toiletries and personal care items. The duffel bags and their contents are used to meet these needs.

Church members saw that each bag had toothpaste, a toothbrush, soap, deodorant, a comb or brush, shampoo, a book, a small toy and a stuffed animal. The Agape Circle members then labeled each bag for an age-appropriate boy or girl.

"These bags will be used by children in our community," Martha Burns, community resource coordinator for Crawford FIA. "It is gratifying to see so many community members reach out in caring and concern to meet these children's needs."

**Your letters,  
intercepted  
and otherwise**

**Date:** Jan. 15  
**To:** **Mark Newell**, Children's Services Specialist  
Ionia County Family Independence Agency, Ionia  
**Subj:** Graduation

I don't know if you remember me but you were my worker a couple years ago. I am writing to update you on my life. I am enrolled in a program through Heart Institute of Technology while going to high school. I will be graduating in May and I was wondering if you would like an invitation? Believe it or not, you had a big part in my life. If it were not for your help, I probably wouldn't be graduating at all. I would probably still be fighting the system. It would mean a lot to me if you watch me graduate. I also currently work two jobs to pay for my car, and save money for college in August. I got a four-year scholarship through the Tuition Incentive Program. So now you can say you have at least one success story. If you ever feel like what you do doesn't help, please remember me. Thank you for everything; you helped me change my life.

**Jami Maurer**

■ Jami's mother, Yvonne Bissell from Muir, Mich., approved the use of this letter.

**Date:** Jan. 14  
**To:** **Roger Spooner**, Adult Services Specialist  
Washtenaw County Family Independence Agency, Ypsilanti

**Subj:** Thank you

I would like to take time to thank you for assisting U.S. Postal Inspector Jim Black on convincing the vulnerable adult in question from participating in a Canadian Lottery scam. This little lady was about to give thousands of dollars to collect her false winnings. The U.S. Post Office got a tip from a postal clerk that was suspicious of comments that the lady made that she was expecting \$1.2 million and was in the process of paying thousands of dollars so that she could collect her winnings. You rose to the occasion and talked sense to the victim taking time from your duties by making a home call with material on other scams and the result was that this victim did not become a victim. Postal Inspector Black shared your generous helping attitude and actions today at our meeting. Thank you for helping that lady not get scammed and thank you for being so willing to cooperate with the US Postal Service request for help.

**Mike Sullivan**

FIA Adult Protective Services, Lansing

■ The author is a policy writer and trainer. The case in question involved a vulnerable adult for whom the addressee is the case specialist. The "scam" originated in Canada. It promised payment of cash prizes if the winner first submitted a certain amount of their own money first.

**Date:** Jan. 14  
**To:** **Don Rewa**, Director  
Eaton County Family Independence Agency, Charlotte  
**Subj:** **Shelly Stratz**

The Office of Children's Ombudsman (OCO) would like to recognize Eaton County foster care worker Shelly Stratz for her work. The OCO investigated a complaint related to Eaton County FIA's handling of the case concerning (three children). We felt compelled to issue a letter recognizing exemplary work by Stratz under supervision of Suzanne Stiles-Burke. Stratz has had primary responsibility for the foster care case since September 2003...(when) Eaton County FIA took over case responsibility from a private contract agency. Stratz was concerned that the permanency plan recommended by the contract agency was inconsistent with the children's best interest. Stratz uncovered information about the parents' CPS and criminal history that was previously unknown and had not been considered by the prior agency. Stratz worked diligently to obtain, document and communicate this relevant information. (She)recommended change in the permanency plan to terminate parental rights. The OCO believes this case highlights actions by the foster care worker that went above and beyond expected standards of practice. Ms. Stratz relentlessly pursued every possible source of information that was relevant to the safety and well being of these children. The OCO commends Ms. Stratz for her superior quality of work and obvious commitment to the well being of (the three children.) We have no doubt that Ms. Stratz is a greatly valued asset to FIA that that she has contributed immensely to the permanency and well being of children in Eaton County.

**Lynne Martinez**

Children's Ombudsman

■ Shelly Stratz is a social services specialist and Suzanne Stiles-Burke is a social services program manager at Eaton County FIA. Lynne Martinez directs Michigan's Office of Children's Ombudsman, an autonomous unit of state government established by statute to investigate complaints about children served by protective services, foster care and adoption services. FIA Office of Family Advocate submitted this letter for publication.

**Something new from FIA**  
is a product of Michigan's  
Family Independence Agency  
Marianne Udow, Director  
Karen Smith, Director  
Office of Communications  
Larry VanDeSande, editor Email:  
[vandesandel@michigan.gov](mailto:vandesandel@michigan.gov)